

Early in the 1850's Thomas Anderson brought his oxen to a halt near a bubbling spring and a waterfall at the headwaters of Cypress Creek about 20 miles northwest of Austin. He decided that here was the place to build a home and rear his family. It was a long trek from Pennsylvania by way of Virginia but he felt that he had at last found a veritable Paradise. There was water, wood and game in abundance. The hills afforded stone for building and the timber yielded rails for fencing. The giant cypress trees had unlimited possibilities for shingle and lumber making. The valleys were fertile and sheltered by the protecting hills.

In time Thomas Anderson and his two sons, Abe and Ed, had completed the family home and built the mill that was to become renowned in history as the mill where gun powder was made for the Confederacy. It was operated by water power and at first served only as a grist mill. Early in 1863, under the direction of the Texas State Military Board, it was converted to the manufacture of gun powder and was designated as Travis Powder Company. Saltpetre and sulphur - two ingredients in making gun powder - were supplied the mill on March the 21st of that year which indicated it was ready to begin operation. Gun powder was one of the most urgent needs of the time in Texas and because of the blockade enforced by the Union Army it had to be brought in by mule team from Mexico - or manufactured. Much powder and sulphur was brought in by freighters, but the road was long and hazardous to Monterrey and Zacatecas, the main trading posts. Six to twelve miles were essential to haul the heavy loads. Cotton, often the medium of exchange, was freighted down with a return load of gun powder and sulphur.

Caves, densely populated with bats, in the vicinity of Anderson Mill made it advantageous to convert the mill to the making of gunpowder. It was, however, a toilsome task to secure the guano from the dark, bat infested, smelly caves. Then the extracting of the saltpetre was a time consuming, tedious process. Thomas Anderson was assisted in the work by Ephriam Tounge and Nick Hays - a brother of the famous Texas Ranger, Captain Jack Hays. Nick Hays is the ancestor of the pioneer Walden families who still reside in the area.

Other powder mills in Texas were located at Bandera, Burnet, San Antonio, Marshall and Waxahachie. The mill at Waxahachie was destroyed by an explosion and the owner killed. There is a story told by the old timers of an attempt to destroy Anderson Mill by three agents of the Union Army - and as the story goes - they were executed by agents of the Confederacy. There are those of the present day who believe they have located the resting places of the ill fated Yankees.

The ruin of historic Anderson Mill was torn down and the stones carted away in 1941 in preparation for the inundation by the waters of Lake Travis after the completion of Mansfield or Marshall Ford Dam. The site of the famous old mill lies beneath the waters of the lake. A historical marker has been erected in commemoration - but in the words of W. D. (Bill) Anderson, grandson of Thomas Anderson - "historical markers are like certificates of merits or diplomas - impressive, but somehow they fail to reveal the drama behind the scenes - the love, the labor, the warmth and the hospitality, the successes and failures, the tears and the laughter that are a part of all human undertakings"

Across the lake from the site of the mill - one lone chimney stands to mark the place where Thomas Anderson built his comfortable home - where Lucy Anderson his wife, and their two daughters, Julia and Marian, performed the thousand-fold duties required to maintain a gracious home. China, silver, linens - treasures they brought from Virginia added charm to this spacious pioneer home. In the basement they stored the many good things from the yearly harvest. Shelves were filled to overflowing with jams, jellies, pickles and preserves. There were smoked hams - done in the Virginia tradition - sausages and bacon in abundance. Fish and game were to be had at will.

Above the basement a ten foot hall ran the entire length of the house. On one side of the hall there was the parlor with a fireplace, and two bedrooms; across the hall there was the family sitting room with a fireplace, the kitchen dining room and a bedroom. A wide verandah ran the width of the front of the house and was reached by nine steps leading up from the flower garden.

The Anderson gardens were irrigated - water was brought by gravity through canals to orchards, vegetables and flowers. Fresh fruit, vegetables and cut flowers were to be had throughout the season. In the early spring the entire hillside was a glorious mass of color - peach, pear, plum and apple blossoms blended pastel pinks, white and rose with the deeper shades of the native red bud. But - of all this that used to be - only the lone chimney remains. The spring and the waterfall have long since been covered by the waters of Lake Travis. The cry of the whip-poor-will still echoes through the hills and the will-o'-the-wisp follows the banks of Cypress when the nights are darkest - these things remain.

Volente, five miles west of Anderson Mill on the shores of Lake Travis, is now the center of neighborhood activities. In 1886 it became a post office and continued as such until 1909. Allie Cluck Anderson, wife of Abe Anderson, was postmistress during those years. Minnie Anderson (Mrs. H. P.) Hensel is the daughter of Allie and Abe Anderson and is an active member of Anderson Mill Gardeners. Mrs. Hensel-recalls that there was a small school house on Long Hollow where she and her brothers, Roy and Emmett attended as small children. Their grandfather made the 20 mile - two day - trip in to Austin to purchase 70 chairs as a donation to the school.

One of the favorite stories of the Anderson Mill-Volente community is that of Harriet Standefer Cluck, wife of George W. Cluck, who had the distinction of being the first Texas woman to ride up the Chisholm Trail. In the spring of 1871, with her three small children (one of them Allie Cluck Anderson) she travelled in a hack behind the combined herds of her husband and Captain D. H. Snyder. They crossed raging torrents, fought Indians and cattle rustlers, but reached their goal safely - the markets at Abilene, Kansas. They returned to their home at Cedar Park in the fall. Julia Cluck (Mrs. S. A.) Friedsam, an active member of Anderson Mill Gardeners, is the daughter of Harriet Standefer and George W. Cluck.

As a gracious gesture to Anderson Mill Gardeners, W. D. Anderson, grandson of Thomas Anderson, wrote the legend, "The Kingdom in the Hills" and presented it to the group.

And - once again to quote from "The Kingdom in the Hills", by W. D. Anderson - "the old mill is gone except in the memories of hundreds of people who remember its picturesque surroundings as a "picnic grounds". There was a lot of life and a heap o'living went on in "these parts"-
But -

"We'll lock the gate behind us
And throw away the key
For there will never be tomorrow
In the "land of used to be".

Mrs. Robert W. McDonald
Anderson Mill Road